

## THE RESPONSIBILITY YOU SHOULD LET GO

Scriptures: Ezekiel 2:8-3:11, Revelation 10:8-11

A few years ago the newsletter for the Union Gospel Mission told the story of a mother named Lois Strader. Lois was a devout follower of Christ who raised her son to be one too. In the story she tells the interviewer, "I always thought if you loved your kids they'd turn out all right. I had high hopes for Robert because I knew he had great potential."

Robert finished high school at the top of his class and became a successful musician with a rock band. He toured full time and made lots of money, but also became more and more addicted to cocaine and alcohol. Meanwhile Lois continued to pray for him, and whenever he came home for a visit she talked to him about his need for God. But Robert brushed her off. He said he knew how to live life on his own. But he didn't. Drugs and alcohol caught up with him, and he lost his job, his apartment, and his girl friend, and had to turn to his parents for help. But though his mother never quit praying for him or talking to him, she refused to loan him money, knowing that it would go to alcohol and drugs. So Robert became homeless and ended up at the Union Gospel Mission (*Mission News*, May 2003).

Let me stop the story there and go back to Ezekiel. In chapters 2 and 3 God sends Ezekiel to preach God's word to the Jewish exiles in Babylon. They were in exile because they had rejected God's word while they were living in their homeland, the promised land of Israel. For decades they lived in God's land worshipping other gods, ignoring God's rules, and indulging themselves in their addictions to money, sex, and power. Eventually these things caught up to them, and like Robert, they became homeless refugees.

God sends Ezekiel talk to these people, to tell them God's word. But in the process God says, "But the house of Israel will not listen to you, for they are not willing to listen to me; because all the house of Israel have a hard forehead and a stubborn heart."

Last week we had an installation service for our new associate pastor, Betsey Moe. As part of the service, one of the ministers of the Presbytery gave a charge to Betsey. Imagine if that minister had said, "Betsey, you are sent to preach to the people of Hamblen Park. But they are not going to listen. They are stubborn and hard headed. They would rather sleep in or sit in their bathrobe reading the newspaper than listen to a sermon or go to adult Sunday School. You are not going to get anywhere with this group. But go be their pastor anyway." Somehow that is not a great way to start a ministry.

God says to Ezekiel, "The house of Israel will not listen to you, for they are not willing to listen to me; because all the house of Israel have a hard forehead and a stubborn heart." But God sends Ezekiel to them anyway. God says, "Mortal, all my words that I shall speak to you receive in your heart and hear with your ears; then go to the exiles, to your people, and speak to them. Say to them, 'Thus says the Lord God'; whether they hear or refuse to hear." Ezekiel is warned that the people may not listen to him, but he is sent to them anyway. He is responsible for sharing God's message, but he is not responsible for what they do with it.

I think there is a lesson here not only for pastors but for parents. You parents are responsible for sharing your faith with your children, but you are not responsible for what they do with it when they grow up. While they are in your care, you are responsible for sharing with them God's word, God's love, and the life God wants them to have. While they are growing up you are responsible for helping them to know about Jesus and teaching them how to worship and helping them learn how to relate to other people in a family of faith. But you are not responsible for what they do with that after they leave home.

As followers of Christ there are certain responsibilities we should let go, and one of them is our responsibility for what other people do. We are not responsible for what other people do. We are responsible only for what we do.

Ah, but here is the catch. You can let go of being responsible for other people, like your children, but that does not mean you can or should quit caring about them.

There is a very strange detail in the story we just read from Ezekiel. At the end of chapter 2, verses 9-10, Ezekiel says, "I looked, and a hand was stretched out to me, and a written scroll was in it. He spread it before me; it had writing on the front and on the back, and written on it were words of lamentation and mourning and woe." The scroll represents the message that God wants Ezekiel to preach. It is a message of lamentation, mourning and woe. Ezekiel is sent to tell the people of Israel that if they don't turn their lives around they will destroy themselves.

That is not the strange part of the story. I imagine Lois Strader had that conversation more than once with her son Robert. I imagine she told him that if he did not get help for his addiction he would destroy himself. Those are words of lamentation, mourning, and woe.

But here is the strange part in the story. Ezekiel is not only to speak this message of woe to the people of Israel; he is to *eat* it. At the beginning of chapter 3 God says to him, "O mortal, eat what is offered to you; eat this scroll and go, speak to the house of Israel." At the Wednesday night "Preview with the Preacher" class people almost immediately started asking about this. What's with eating the scroll? God never asks any other Old Testament prophet to do such a thing. Why Ezekiel? (You should try out this Wednesday night Preview with the Preacher class. It could be subtitled: "Putting the Preacher on the Spot.")

Why is Ezekiel asked to eat the scroll? I think the answer to that question goes to the heart of Ezekiel. It is what makes Ezekiel different from all of the other prophets. Ezekiel is commanded not only to speak words of lamentation, mourning, and woe but to take those words into himself. That is what it means to eat the scroll. Not only does Ezekiel warn the Israelites of the anguish they will suffer if they reject God; he experiences that anguish in himself. He feels it in his own gut.

This happens more than once in Ezekiel. Turn to Ezekiel, chapter 4 (OT, p. 772) and look at verse 4, God says to Ezekiel, "Then lie on your left side, and place the punishment of the house of Israel upon it; you shall bear their punishment for the number of days that you lie there." Then in verse 6 God says, "When you have completed these, you shall lie down a second time, but on your right side, and bear the punishment of the house of Judah." Ezekiel not only tells the people that God's judgment is coming, he suffers it with them.

There is another example at the beginning of chapter 5. One of the earlier prophets, Isaiah, uses the image of a razor to describe the punishment that God would bring on Israel for their sins. He says that the king of Assyria will shave the heads and beards of the people before taking them into exile. Now look at Ezekiel 5:1: “And you, O mortal, take a sharp sword; use it as a barber’s razor and run it over your head and your beard.” Ezekiel does not just warn the people that God will shave their heads and take them into captivity. Ezekiel suffers this indignity himself. He takes the words of lamentation, mourning, and woe into himself. God’s word may taste sweet when you speak it. But as we heard in our first scripture lesson from Revelation, when you take God’s word, God’s scroll, into your stomach, it can turn bitter, because it means sharing in the bitterness of people you care about.

When Lois Strader refused to loan money to her son Robert, she let go of her responsibility for him. But she did not let go of caring about him. She never quit praying for him, and that turned out to be the key to his transformation. Without money from his parents, Robert ended up homeless, and one day with no where else to go he stumbled into the Union Gospel Mission. He stayed there 22 months while they worked with him to overcome his addictions and get his life back on track. In the story about him he said, “I thank God I had a mother with faith to pray for me for forty years.” Forty year!

As parents we are in a tough spot. Sooner or later we must give up trying to control our children and allow them to suffer the consequences of their actions. But we never quit carrying about them, so we suffer, too. It is like Ezekiel. We suffer deep in our hearts, deep in our guts, for the stupidity of those we can no longer control.

If you think about it, God is in the same position. By giving us freewill God let go of trying to control us. But God still cares about us. So when we rebel, when we try to assert our independence from God and get into trouble, God’s heart is the first to break.

In the same newsletter from the Union Gospel Mission there is a poem written by a mother named Grace Crowell. It is called “Prayer for Grown Sons.” Part of it goes like this:

They are men now, Lord;  
My hands at last are emptied  
of the countless tasks required so long,  
and I am helpless, quite, before  
the problems grown sons face.  
I cannot right earth’s wrong  
or smooth their pathways.  
But, dear Lord, You can speak to them ...  
I loose their hands, having done all I could do  
and trust them, Lord, implicitly to You.

That’s what Ezekiel had to do, and so do we.

- Ken Onstot  
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